

# New after school program debuts

GETTYSBURG TIMES • TUESDAY, MARCH 22, 2016

BY KEN KNOX

*Times Staff Writer*

The facilitators of a new after-school program are doing their part to enrich the academic and social landscape throughout Adams County.

The program, which was developed by the non-profit organization Respective Solutions Group (RSG) in partnership with Manos Unidas Executive Director Amelia Contreras and funded under a Cohort 8 grant through the Pennsylvania Department of Education's 21st Century Community Learning Center, debuted on Feb. 29 in six local schools, including Gettysburg Area School District (GASD) sites Lincoln Elementary, James Gettys Elementary, Franklin Township Elementary and Gettysburg Area Middle School, as well as Vida Charter School and the Montessori Charter School.

"Our goal was that any child seeking help with academics could receive free programming every day after school and that the programs would be open to all Gettysburg children," says RSG President An-

drea Neiderer, who notes that the sessions provide "reliable structure" to both children and their parent by following the normal school year.

Beginning after the dismissal of the regular school day, the programs follow a two-hour format during which students are fed a healthy snack, coached through one hour of academic reinforcement, taught lessons to develop and improve social skills, and given activities to reinforce social and emotional development. The focus, says Project Director Contreras, is on "learning and making it fun in a more informal setting."

"We are trying to give a little more freedom to the students while at the same time having them work on something from the social skills activity as well," Contreras says. "We're building skills in a way that the children are going to be interested in participating because they're playing games. We have to have structure, but we're trying to do it in a way that they're not aware of."

One benefit of the program is the low student-teacher ratio; there are typically two teach-

ers and an assistant providing support to the 30-35 students currently enrolled in each program. Additionally, each program can be catered to meet the particular needs of its students.

"After-school can feel like a club or a one-room schoolhouse, and can really take on the character of its students and the professionals on staff," said Neiderer, citing "theme weeks" inspired by students at Montessori Charter School, Spanish language activities at Vida and interactive, high-tech activities at Gettysburg Area Middle School as examples. "These programs promote a love of learning through inspiring youth by speaking directly to their backgrounds and needs."

According to Gettysburg Area School District Assistant Superintendent Dr. Christine Lay, the programs also alleviate worries of today's working parents by ensuring students not only get exercise and complete homework, but are also looked after in a safe environment.

"Parents have peace of mind

(See SCHOOL on Page A8)

# School

(Continued from Page A1)

knowing their child is remaining at school and benefiting from supervised care after school on a daily basis," Lay said. "The students are coming to school prepared the next day, and families benefit from a relaxed home environment. It's win-win."

"There's always a struggle with what the children do after school," adds Contreras. "If they go home they're going to be alone or the parents are going to be paying for babysitters. Or there are going unsupervised or supervised by their older siblings. Here, they have a structure, and it's not just a continuance of the school day. For parents, they know they're going to have help here, and when they pick them up after work, they are sure their kids

have completed homework and had a snack, and that they had fun and learned something."

Although the after-school program has only been under way for a few weeks, Contreras says it is already having the desired results by providing an informal setting that supports the more formal school day.

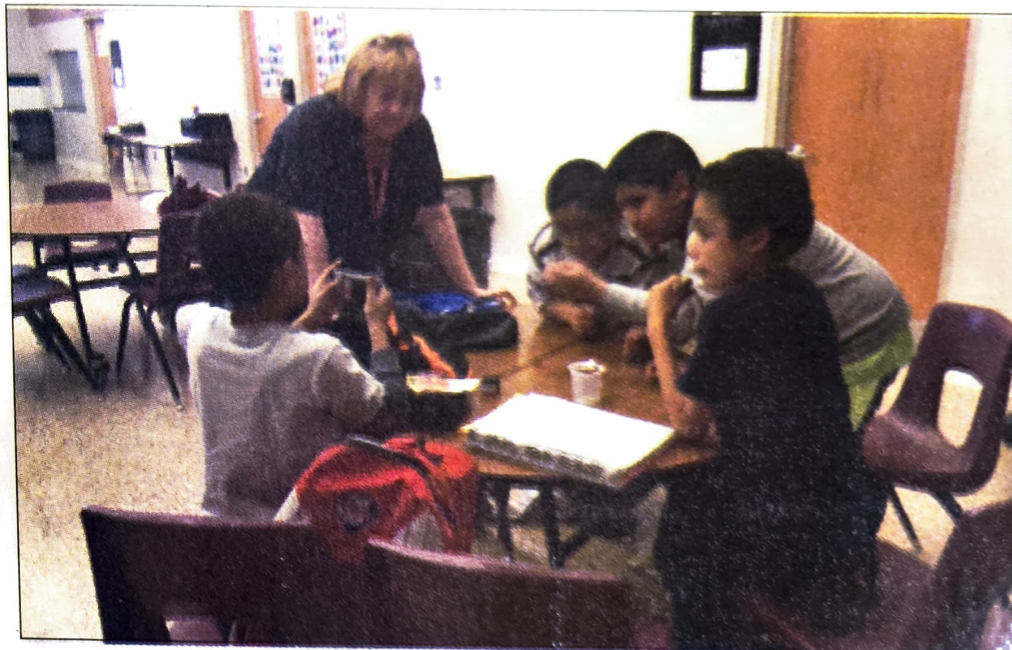
"We're seeing them develop friendship and confidence," she claims. "During after-school, they feel more free to approach you with questions with something they didn't understand, and then we communicate that with their teachers, who also provide feedback to us on how to support the students."

"We're operating with high fidelity, assuring that we increase overall reading and math scores as well as working with partners to help students understand that many career options await them post-grad-

uation and higher education," Neiderer adds.

Contreras, who comes from a background of running similar programs designed specifically for Hispanic and other migrant children, says she is pleased with how fast the program is catching on, and looks forward to watching it grow and evolve.

"To already have more than 150 kids enrolled in only the second week is great," she says. "But what I'm most happy about is the support we are receiving from the schools. By working with schools to open the doors of schools to parents and community and bring them together for the benefit of the child, the beauty of an after-school program is that you get to create community. I feel like this is a service that the community has been waiting for."



**AFTER SCHOOL FUN** - Dana Newton coaches a small group of after-school students through an academic exercise using modern technology at Lincoln Elementary School, one of six schools hosting a new after-school program.

KEN KNOX/GETTYSBURG TIMES